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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Damage to the Intelligence Agencies

SCOTT SIMON: President Reagan has caused a furor with comments he made yesterday when he was asked about the need for greater security at American embassies throughout the world. Mr. Reagan said that what he called real protection from terrorist attacks, like the one last week in Beirut, comes from intelligence gathering that would give advance warning. He said the lack of intelligence on this latest incident is not the fault of his Administration.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: We're feeling the effects today of the near-destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years. Before we came here, the effort, somehow, to say that spying is somehow dishonest and let's get rid of our intelligence agents, and we did that to a large extent.

SIMON: White House and Reagan campaign aids said yesterday that Mr. Reagan was referring to the Carter Administration.

NPR's David Molpus reports on the reaction.

DAVID MOLPUS: Democrats on the House and Senate Intelligence Committees have lambasted the President for suggesting that failure to prevent the Beirut bombing can be blamed on actions of past Administrations. Irresponsible, reckless, ghastly were some of the terms applied to the President's allegation.

Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont:

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: There's no basis whatsoever in the President's charge. And I think probably the thing I find

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the most disturbing is that the President knows there's no basis in it. He's tried this kind of a charge before to excuse his own mistakes. And his own Director of the CIA, Bill Casey, even had to write to the Senate Intelligence Committee to say that there is no basis in the President's charge.

MOLPUS: Leahy is referring to remarks by White House spokesman Larry Speakes after last year's Beirut bombing that killed 241 Americans, remarks that were similar to Reagan's comments yesterday. In his letter last March, CIA Director Casey said, "The increase in personnel and budgetary strength of the Agency began during the Carter Administration." Casey said he would not tolerate any attempt to use the fact of revitalization of the CIA for partisan political purposes.

SENATOR LEAHY: One of the most amazing retractions I've ever seen.

MOLPUS: Leahy says the Beirut problem was not faulty intelligence.

SENATOR LEAHY: His own intelligence community told him that our embassy was in danger of being bombed in Beirut. His own people told him that there should be beefed-up security. Instead, the security wasn't beefed up. It was left incomplete. The fact is, they didn't take the security steps that their own intelligence service told them to, and a number of people died.

MOLPUS: Equally livid is Admiral Stansfield Turner, CIA Director under President Carter.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: It's unfair for any President to try to blame something on his predecessor 3 1/2 years after the fact, after he's been in office that long. He's had plenty of time to do whatever he needed or wanted to do with intelligence.

Secondly, Mr. Reagan, himself, is the man who's done more damage to the CIA than any President in history. He's done it because he has politicized it, because he's appointed people with questionable ethical standards. If you just pick up the paper every day, you read allegations of illegal or improper actions by the CIA. And that's hurting it very considerably.

And thirdly, as is so often, unfortunately, the case with President Reagan, he's got his facts mixed up. In the Carter Administration, we did not reduce one intelligence operative overseas. We reduced only bureaucratic overhead in Washington.

MOLPUS: But others from the intelligence community say

there is basis to the Reagan charge.

Ray Cline was Deputy Director of the CIA in the mid-Sixties.

RAY CLINE: It is a fact that in the Carter years there was a deliberate diminution, destruction of a great deal of the capability of CIA for conducting human-source operations to collect intelligence. They did indeed fire or shut down the jobs of about 800 people.

MOLPUS: Are you saying it was quite open policy of the Carter Administration to deemphasize clandestine activity and human intelligence gathering?

CLINE: Exactly.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not so at all. That's totally erroneous.

MOLPUS: Again, Stansfield Turner.

ADMIRAL TURNER: What happened is that, not due to the Carter Administration, but due to the march of American technology, by the mid-1970s technically collected intelligence had become increasingly important. Satellites and electronic listening and so on. That did not mean, however, that human intelligence was less important. And there was no deemphasis whatsoever on human intelligence.

MOLPUS: Ray Cline strongly disagrees and says many of the 800 CIA officials who were fired were key elements in directing the agency's human intelligence network. And, Cline says, it will take more time than Reagan has had to reestablish an effective network.